ERIC Document Resume	See Instruction Sheet	DATE OF RESUME 8/17/65	DATE RECEIVED

A. PUBLICATION DATA

1. ERIC NUMBER	2. ORIGINATOR CONTROL NO(S).	3. IDENTIFICATION NO.	DO NOT WRITE IN SPACE BELOW
ED000570	7321		

4. AUTHOR(S): N.A.

5. TITLE OF DOCUMENT ABSTRACTED: Trends in Quality of University Students. Research Study IV.

6. PUBLICATION TITLE: N.A.

7. EDITOR(S): N.A.

8. PLACE OF ORIGIN
ORG. JSCCHE Rm. 333 Wisconsin Center Bldg.
ST.
CITY, STATE 702 Langdon St. Madison, Wis.
TELE. EXT.
INST/LOC CODE

9. PUBLISHER OR SOURCE Wisconsin: Joint Staff Coordinating Committee for Higher Education

10. VOL.	11. PAGES	12. MO./YR.	13. TOTAL PP.
N.A.	N.A.	57	

MICROFILM COPY AVAILABLE YES ☒ NO ☐

COPYRIGHT GRANTED YES ☐ NO ☒

COPYRIGHT RELEASE FILED YES ☐ NO ☐

TYPE OF REPORT
PROPOSAL ☐
IN-PROGRESS ☐
FINAL ☒
FOLLOW-UP ☐

OTHER ERIC REFERENCES:

ERIC SATELLITE CODE

B. INDEXING DATA

14. SUBJECT AREA

15. TYPE OF ENDEAVOR Survey

16. INDEXING TERMS (6-12)

	ranks	admissions		
surveys	aptitude			
students	evaluation			

17. ABSTRACT (MAX. 250 WORDS)

Comparison of entering freshmen classes for 1930, 1940, 1950, and 1956, as to rank in high school class, rank in test of scholastic aptitude, and grade-point average achieved in freshman year of university work. Study shows that freshman students entering in 1956 were superior to those of comparison years. Reveals a consistent trend toward a more select entering group.

ERIC No.

18. SOURCE OF ABSTRACT

C. FUNDING DATA

19. SUPPORTING ORGANIZATION	20. DIVISION OR DEPT.	21. CONTRACT NO. / PROJECT NO.
	22. TOTAL COST OF PROJECT	
	23. DURATION OF PROJECT	U.S. Department of Health, Education, and Welfare Office of Education

ERIC Form 1

Wisconsin; Joint Staff

IV-2

U. S. DEPARTMENT OF HEALTH, EDUCATION AND WELFARE
Office of Education

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Research Study IV
December, 1957

TRENDS IN THE QUALITY OF UNIVERSITY STUDENTS

The proportion of college-age youth who go to college has been steadily increasing. In 1930, there were 188,763 college-age youth (18-21) in Wisconsin, and there were 22,571 students enrolled in Wisconsin's undergraduate colleges. In 1957, there were 182,335 college-age youth (6,428 fewer than in 1930) but there were 49,698 students enrolled in undergraduate colleges (26,127 more than in 1930).

These facts have led to the questions: What has been happening to the quality of the students who are going to college? Are increasing enrollments bringing decreasing quality in the scholastic aptitude and achievement of the entering students?

Answers to these questions were sought in data about freshman students entering the University of Wisconsin over the period 1930 to 1956, inclusive.

The members of the entering freshman classes for the years 1930, 1940, 1950, and 1956 were compared in the following terms:

(1) rank in high school graduating class

(2) rank in test of scholastic aptitude

(3) grade-point average achieved in the freshman year of University work.

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Table I shows the percentage of the members of each entering freshman class who had ranked in the top quarter, second and third quarters, and bottom quarter of their high school graduating classes.

These data show that the entering class of 1956 has a significantly larger proportion of top-ranking students, and a significantly lower proportion of low-ranking students than were present in the class of 1930. The percentage of entering freshman students who had ranked in the top quarter of their graduating classes increased progressively as follows: 45% in 1930; 51% in 1940; 53% in 1950; and 56% in 1956.

The percentage who were in the bottom half of their graduating classes dropped progressively as follows: 27% in 1930; 21% in 1940; 20% in 1950; and 15% in 1956.

In terms of this measure, the freshman students now entering the University are superior to students entering the University in the previous comparison years, and the trend has been consistently toward a more select entering group.

Table I

COMPARISON OF UNIVERSITY OF WISCONSIN FRESHMAN CLASSES
BY HIGH SCHOOL RANK

1930, 1940, 1950, 1956

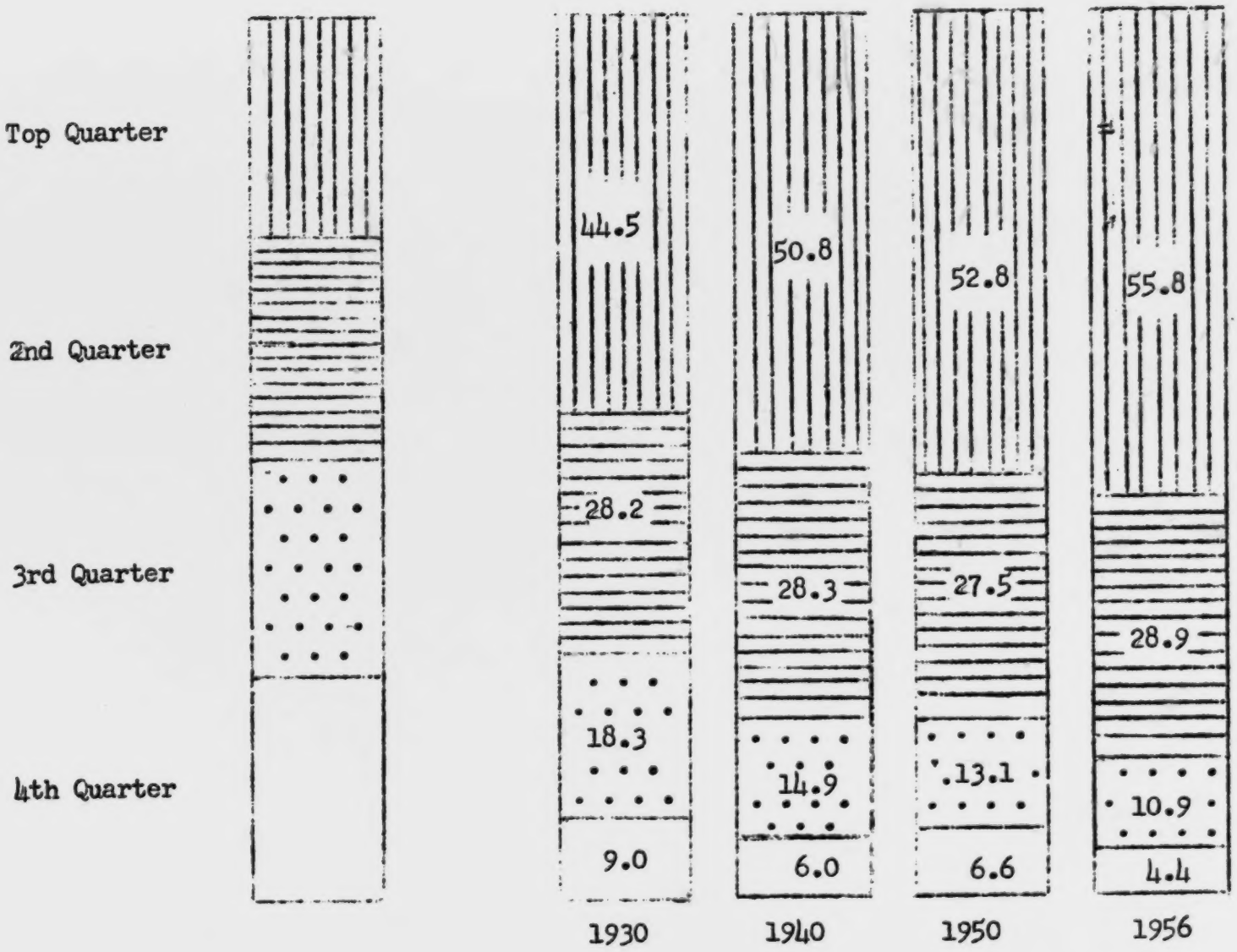


Table II compares the same entering freshman classes upon measures of scholastic aptitude resulting from a psychological test administered during the freshman orientation period at the University.

The table shows the percentage of the numbers of each entering freshman class who made scores which placed them in the top quarter, second and third quarters, and bottom quarter of scores made by freshman students entering four-year colleges throughout the United States.

These data indicate two facts: (1) The freshmen entering the University of Wisconsin have been consistently superior on this measure in comparison with the total group of freshman students entering four-year colleges in the United States. (2) While changes have been comparatively slight over the period covered in this study, the direction of change has been toward a larger proportion of students with superior aptitude scores and a smaller proportion with lower than average aptitude scores.

Examination of the scholastic aptitude test scores made by the University's entering freshmen in each of the comparison years indicates that the quality of performance has not changed significantly throughout the twenty-five year period. The percentage of high-achieving students in the University entering classes has been increasing, but these students have not had higher scholastic aptitude scores.

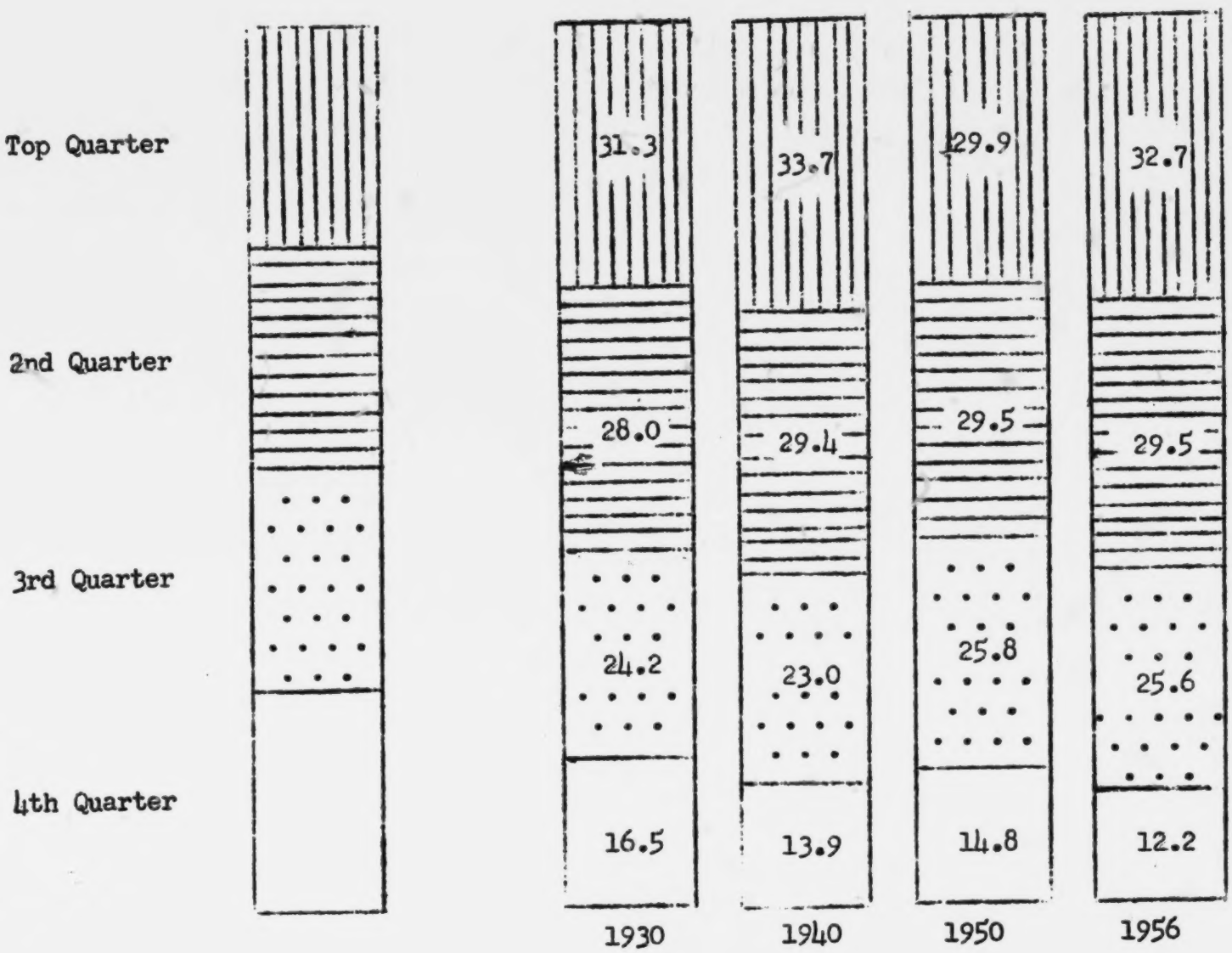
Table II

COMPARISON OF UNIVERSITY OF WISCONSIN FRESHMAN CLASSES
ON
PSYCHOLOGICAL TEST SCORES*

1930, 1940, 1950, 1956

American Council on Education Test

University of Wisconsin Freshman Classes



* American Council on Education, Psychological Examination.

When both achievement in high school and measures of scholastic aptitude are considered, the entering freshman class as a whole is superior to the classes entering in the comparison years. The next question is, how do these students compare in university achievement during the freshman year?

Table III compares the numbers of these same classes in terms of the percentage making honor grades, superior grades, satisfactory grades and unsatisfactory grades in their freshman year at the University.

Table III

SCHOLASTIC ACHIEVEMENT OF FRESHMAN CLASSES
ENTERING UNIVERSITY OF WISCONSIN

1930, 1940, 1950, 1956

Level of Achievement		1930	1940	1950	1956
Hcnor level	(3.6-4.0)	3.8%	5.7%	4.8%-	5.6%
Superior level	(3.0-4.0)	15.8%	15.6%	15.0%	15.6%
Satisfactory level	(2.0-2.99)	48.4%	44.0%	49.5%	49.6%
Unsatisfactory level	(1.0 and below)	32.0%	34.7%	30.7%	29.2%

These data show that there is little difference in the proportion of grade point averages earned at the several levels of achievement in the comparison years. The trend, if any, is toward better achievement. In 1956, 21.2% achieved "B" or better grades. In 1930, the percentage was 19.6%. In 1956, 29.2% received unsatisfactory grades. In 1930, the percentage was 32%.

In summary, these data indicate that the students entering the University, as measured by rank in high school class, by measures of scholastic aptitude, and by scholastic achievement during their freshman year are superior to students who entered the University in 1930; and the long-time trend is toward an increasingly select freshman class. The growing enrollments are resulting from the decisions of a higher percentage of the more able high school graduates to continue their education in the University. Conversely, smaller percentages of the students who had not been above average students in high school are choosing to enter the University.

In view of these data, the high percentage of entering freshmen who fail to achieve satisfactory levels of university work during the freshman year needs further study.

This study indicates that the University has been getting comparatively good students and that the quality of students is getting better. This is happening along with increasing enrollments -- and this is good. The central task of the University and its colleges is to match the better students with better instruction. To improve the quality of instruction in the face of increasing enrollment is the central educational task. Improvements in the calibre of the student who goes to college mean little unless the calibre of educational experience he is provided matches his potential in ability and ambition.